THE ALIEN ACCORDING TO THE TORAH

By Georges Chawkat Moucarry

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The article is not a technical OT study, but rather an attempt to bring a broad sweep of OT teaching to bear on a sensitive issue that is of importance in most countries of the world. The original French article led to correspondence and an exchange of views in Ichthus *no. 134 (1986), pp. 31–38.* Ichthus *is obtainable from 2 rue Antoine Pons, 13004 Marseilles, France*.

Job, Rahab,[1] Ruth and Naaman[2] were all foreigners whose lives became in some way intimately involved in the history of Israel. Yet these two men and two women, as outstanding as they were, represented only a small portion of the foreign population within the borders of Israel that numbered, at the time of Solomon, 153,600 people.[3] Compared with the total Israelite population at that time, this was an impressive number of aliens.

What was the status of the foreigner in Israel? How was the native population to view them? What meaning did their presence have for Israel? What future was promised them by the prophets, both the alien residing in Israel as well as all foreigners, including those living in their far-distant homelands?[4] Such are the questions we must ask if we are genuinely concerned by what is happening today in Israel between Israelis and Palestinians or, for that matter, between aliens and natives in any part of the world.

A question of vocabulary

First, the Torah speaks of differing types of foreigners, employing a precise vocabulary to distinguish those aliens established in Israel from those living outside Israel. Those within Israel are *either* (1) *gēr*: from the verb *gûr*, meaning to live as a foreigner in a country not one's own; it often follows the noun as if to emphasize the nature of the foreigner's life in Israel.[5] In this article the word will be

translated ‘alien’ or ‘immigrant’; *or* (2) *tôšāḇ*: from the verb *yāšaḇ*, which means to sojourn in a country that is not one’s own. Sometimes this word is followed by the verb *gûr*, apparently for the same purpose.[6] We will translate it ‘resident’ or ‘guest’. *Gēr* and *tôšāb* have similar meanings and are associated in many passages.[7]

Those living outside Israel are *either* (3) *nēḵār* and *noḵrî*: two nominal adjectives derived from the same root, designating the true foreigner, one who lives in his own land.[8] This will be translated as ‘foreigner’; or (4) *zûr*: a term that also designates the foreigner settled in his own land. This will be translated as ‘stranger’ or ‘unknown’.

Because of the similarity of *nēḵār* and *zūr* they are associated in many texts.[9] Apart from certain instances where they take on a specific meaning,[10] these terms may describe individuals,[11] though more often they refer to foreign peoples in a relation of conflict with Israel. In such a context, ‘foreigners’ become imbued with antagonistic qualities: proud, menacing, pagan, threatening.[12]

In order to understand what the Torah has to say in regard to foreigners, it is essential to bear in mind the differing terminology and in particular the distinction made between those living in Israel and those living outside.

The example of Abraham

The history of Israel begins with God calling Abraham to leave his native country for a country unknown to him: God’s call thus takes on the colour of exile.[13]

Abraham arrives in the land of Canaan, a land that God promises to his descendants.[14] A severe famine strikes, forcing Abraham to go into Egypt, where he lives for a while.[15] He then returns to Canaan and God makes a covenant with him, announcing that his descendants will be aliens in a foreign land.[16] Abraham then moves on to live for a time in Gerar, in the south of the country.[17] There he seals a pact of peace with Abimelech, king of the Philistines.[18] When Sarah dies at Hebron, in Canaan, Abraham asks the inhabitants of that land to sell him ground in which to bury his wife. Generous with him, they make him

a gift of the land. Abraham refuses this generosity, saying that he is an alien and a guest among them.[19]

This statement may surprise us since it refers to land that Abraham, by divine promise, could have considered his own. Indeed it reveals to us the noble mind of the patriarch. Abraham had not abandoned his native land in order to receive another in its place. One might think he was waiting for God himself to fulfil his promise. But quite aside from demonstrating his patience and his detachment from material things, Abraham's attitude indicates how the 'father of believers' saw himself in regard to the One who called him. To confess, in effect, that one is an alien on the earth and a guest in God's earthly house is the distinctive mark of a faith that holds God to be the possessor of all things and man to be but a passing shadow.

The Israelites: aliens and guests

After his father's death, Isaac leaves for Gerar to live in the home of King Abimelech.[20] He then returns to Hebron where he will be buried.[21] His son, Jacob, leaves for the home of his uncle Laban in Mesopotamia.[22]He will not return to Canaan until years later.[23] Like Abraham, Jacob and his sons are obliged to emigrate to Egypt;[24] but their exile will be long. They will never again see the Promised Land: their descendants will live and die in exile. Centuries later, Moses will come forth to lead the Israelites out of Egypt; and Moses, in his turn, will take refuge in Midian. There he gives to his son the name of Gershom, for he says, 'I have become an alien in a foreign land.'[25] Twice an alien or immigrant, he could have added!

Did this experience as an alien, which was the condition of all the patriarchs in Canaan[26] and of all the Israelites in Egypt,[27] end with the conquest of the Promised Land? Yes, in one sense, since they thus found themselves in the land promised by God through Abraham. But the question lingers: Did the land then become theirs?

Let us observe how the Torah justifies the law of the Jubilee in relation to the repurchase of property in Israel: 'The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but altens and guests.'[28]In other words, the law was

given to remind the Israelites that their conquest of the Promised Land did not make them its owners, but rather its caretakers. We would do well to meditate on this lesson in humility. With one stroke, the law placed the Israelites in a right perspective of their relationship to God. Abraham, their father, was more than an example: he was a model, not only for them but for all, Christians and Muslims alike, who claim him as their spiritual forebear.

The status of the alien in Israel

Once the Israelites were established in the land of Canaan, their community life was placed under the authority of Mosaic law. Given the significant number of aliens in their midst,[29] it would have been surprising for this law *not* to have taken them into account. However, the law does give precise instructions with regard to the status of aliens living in Israel. The celebration of the Passover represented for every Israelite the commemoration of a primal event for Israel: it would seem to be natural, therefore, to restrict this celebration to Israelites. However, with the exception of foreigners passing through the land and there only temporarily,[30] all aliens who had linked their destiny to Israel and had undergone ritual circumcision could participate in the Passover. The law that was valid for Israelites was valid for them as well.[31]

Indeed, the validity of all laws in the land extended to these immigrants. The Sabbath[32] was established, in part, to allow the alien to rest.[33] The products of the sabbatical year were gathered to feed all, native as well as immigrant.[34] The laws regarding the Day of Atonement,[35] offerings,[36] the prohibition on the consumption of blood,[37] ritual purity,[38] idolatry and blasphemy,[39] the sacred meal,[40] inability to pay one's debts,[41]slavery,[42]atonement for sins,[43] the cities of refuge,[44] and the law of the talion,[45] all show that aliens living in Israel were closely associated with and even integrated into the national life. The solemn act sealing this relationship probably was their participation in the making of the Covenant,[46] confirmed by their commitment to respect the law.[47] Since the law was both a religious constitution and

a civil code, this commitment signified a dual allegiance, to the God of Israel and to the nation itself.

You will love the alien as yourself

Without a doubt, the Torah encouraged the integration of the immigrant into the community; yet the Torah also emphasizes the precariousness of the alien's situation. This is indicated by the fact that the commandments concerning the immigrant are often the same as those concerning either the poor,[48] or the Levite,[49] or the widow,[50] or the widow and the orphan,[51]or the Levite, the widow and the orphan,[52] or the poor, the widow and the orphan.[53] The situation of all of these persons was fragile, so that the Torah gave them an attention and protection commensurate with their vulnerability.

But the commandments concerning the alien prescribed for Israelites in the Torah are distinctive in that the Israelites, themselves had been aliens in Egypt;[54] they were well able to identify with the immigrants and 'to know how it feels to be aliens'.[55] So they are neither to exploit the alien nor to oppress him,[56] but rather to render justice between their brothers and the immigrants without partiality.[57] If they refuse to respect the rights of aliens, they will fall under the curse of the law.[58]

In day-to-day life, everything is not simply a matter of justice. God loves the alien and is partial to no one;[59]and it must be the same for the Israelites: 'The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself …'[60]—if, that is, they want to conform to God, taking the love he has for them as a model. The Israelites will be generous to the aliens, giving them a share from their triennial tithe,[61] leaving them the excess of the harvests,[62] and inviting them to participate in their celebration.[63] This was to be their way of saying that they too are aliens in the sight of God.

The prayer of the alien; his intercession in favour of the foreigner

We hear in the Psalms the echo of the Torah in the soul of the faithful Israelite. He recognizes his own inherent weakness, being an alien on the earth, and this leads him to

ask God to show him the commandments so that he may follow the way of righteousness.[64] He begs God to answer his prayers and to hear his cry, for, he says, ‘I dwell with you as an immigrant, a guest, as all my fathers were.’[65] Having no illusions about his lowly position before God, rejected by his own because of his loyalty to him, the psalmist gives vent to his suffering because he has become ‘a foreigner to my brothers, a stranger to my own mother’s sons’.[66]

In this context, it is not difficult for him to identify with the alien in his country who, as he himself, endures the injustice of men ‘[who] slay the widow and the alien; [who] murder the fatherless’.[67] So he calls on the God of righteousness and compassion, ‘[who] watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but [who] frustrates the ways of the wicked’.[68]

On the eve of his death and at a time when the preparations for the construction of the temple were completed, David addresses a prayer to God that expresses, with a heightened sense of his own frailty, man’s relationship to God:

> Now, our God, we give you thanks and praise your glorious name. But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand. We are aliens and guests in your sight, as were all our forefathers. Our days on earth are like a shadow, without hope.[69]

How better to express the nakedness and brevity of man’s existence in the face of the generosity and eternity of God?

In his prayer of inauguration of the temple, Solomon recalls the faithfulness of God to his promises concerning Israel. His prayer, which exalts the divine majesty, rises for a moment above the land of Israel, and regards the foreigner come from a distant country to pray to God in this house:

> As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of your great name and your mighty hand and your outstretched arm—when he comes and prays toward this temple, then hear from your dwelling place, and do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth

may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel ...[70]

This glimmer of universalism will become, in the message of the prophets, a great light illuminating the immigrants in Israel, as well as more distant strangers.

The good news of the prophets to the aliens and foreigners

Recalling the equality before the law of both Israelites and aliens,[71] the prophets denounce the oppression of the alien in Israel.[72] They call Israel to treat the alien justly.[73] Malachi announces the coming of the Lord in person to judge those who violate the right of the alien, thus disdaining divine law.[74]

But the prophets do not simply remind their listeners of the commandments of the Torah. Ezekiel assures the aliens that they will inherit the land in the same way as the Israelites.[75] Isaiah announces to the immigrants[76] as well as to the foreigners[77] that they will be fully incorporated into the people of God. They will all come to pray in his house which will be called a 'house of prayer for all nations':[78] They will participate in the construction of the new Jerusalem and in the celebration of her rites.[79] They will make her flocks to graze and will work her land[80]with joy and peace.[81] The city will be forever freed from all her enemies, and her inhabitants 'will serve the Lord their God and David their king, whom I will raise up for them'.[82]

Contemporary perspectives

The debate over immigration is a burning issue in many parts of the Western world. A review of the biblical passages concerning the alien shows that God's Word calls believers to adopt a hospitable attitude toward immigrants, marked by a true spirit of charity, in the best sense of that term. Their precarious position should be an added motivation not to exploit aliens, but to respect their rights and to treat them with goodness and justice. This opening, welcoming attitude contrasts, of course, with the spirit of self-absorption, suspicion and rejection human beings assume all too quickly in response to what is foreign to them. If I am content simply to exist alongside the foreigner, making no effort to know

him or understand him, I will be more likely, in crisis, to consider his presence as a threat to my existence. If, on the other hand, I make the effort to meet with him, I discover beneath his foreignness a neighbour who symbolizes God's call to me to broaden my horizons and to live with my brother in a common humanity.

And how can we not see the connection between the remarkable teaching of the Torah on the foreigner, given in precise terms to Israel, and the present-day situation of 'foreigners' in Israel? I intentionally put this word in quotation marks, for the irony of history is such that the Palestinians are considered by Israelis today to be strangers in their own homeland. Has the weight of history become so heavy that this reversal of situations fails to provoke our indignation? Is not the responsibility of those who love Israel precisely to remind her, as did the prophets of old, of the teaching of her own scriptures? Should the messianic prophecies abolishing the distinction between the Israelites and aliens remain but a dead letter until the coming of the Messiah? Or rather, do they not constitute a directive to follow now, so as to announce the messianic reign? The mission of Christians, awaiting the return of Christ, is to inscribe in the present time the meaning of the history which his return will reveal. Would it be otherwise for those who transmitted to us the messianic hope?

Finally, the presence of immigrants is in itself, for believers, a sign: a sign that believers themselves are aliens and immigrants before God. Their existence, in other words, is as fleeting as a shadow or a breath; and what goods they possess are but expressions of the generosity of their Creator. To be conscious of one's status of alien on the earth means, for the believer, not only to act accordingly with regard to the alien living within one's borders; it also means to marvel at the paradox of the great vocation given by God to his humble human creature:

When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,
which you have set in place,

what is man that you are mindful of him,
the son of man that you care for him?
You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory and honour.
You made him ruler over the works of your hands;
you put everything under his feet …
(Psalm 8:3–6)

(Scripture quotations have been taken from the New International Version of the Bible.)

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[1] *Cf.* Jos. 2.
[2] *Cf.* 2 Ki. 5.
[3] *Cf.* 2 Ch. 2:16–17. Foreigners provided the bulk of the manpower for the building of the temple (*cf.* 1 Ch. 22:2; 2 Ch. 8:7–8).
[4] *Cf.* Is. 57:19.
[5] Ex. 12:48–49; Lv. 16:29; 17:8, 10, 12; 18:26; 19:33–34; 20:2; Nu. 9:14, 15, 16, 26, 29; 19:10; Jos. 20:9; Ezk. 20:9, 47:22.
[6] Lv. 25:6, 45.
[7] Gn. 23:4; Lv. 25:23, 35, 47; Nu. 35:15.
[8] 1 Ki. 8:41.
[9] Jb. 19:15; Pss. 69:8; 81:9; Pr. 2:16; 5:10, 20; 7:15; 20:16; 27:2, 13; Is. 28:21; 61:5; Je. 5:19; La. 5:2; Ob. 11.
[10] To describe the laity not of Aaron's descendants (Ex. 29:33; 30:33; Lv. 22:10, 12, 13; Nu. 1:51; 3:10, 38; 17:5; 18:4, 7; *cf.* 25:5) the unauthorized fire (Lv. 10:1; Nu. 3:4; 26:61); unholy incense (Ex. 30:9 rsv); the adulterous woman (Pr. 2:16; 5:3, 20; 6:24; 7:5; 22:14; 23:27); idols (Gn. 35:2, 4; Dt. 31:16; 32:12, 16; Jos. 24:20, 23; Jdg. 10:16; 1 Sa. 7:3; 2 Ch. 14:3; 33:15; Pss. 44:21; 81:9; Is. 2:22; 43:12; Je. 3:13; 5:19; 8:19; Ezk. 16:32; Ho. 5:7; Dn. 11:39; Mal. 2:11); persons (Gn. 31:15; Jb. 15:19; 19:15) and things (2 Ki. 19:24; Pss. 137:4; Pr. 23:33; Ho. 8:12; Zp. 1:8) unknown or corrupt (Is. 17:10; Je. 2:21), or simply with reference to another person (1 Ki. 3:18; Pr. 14:10; 27:2).
[11] Gn. 17:12, 27; Jdg. 10:16; Ru. 2:10; 2 Sa. 15:19; 1 Ki. 11:1, 8; Ezr. 10:2, 10, 11, 14, 17, 18, 44; Ne. 9:2; 13:26, 27, 30; Ec. 6:2.

[12] 2 Sa. 22:45, 46; Pss. 18:44–45; 54:5; 109:11; 144:7, 11; Is. 1:7; 2:6; 25:2, 5; 29:5; Je. 5:2, 19, 21; 30:8. La. 5:2; Ezk. 7:21; 11:9; 28:7; 30:12; 31:12; Ho. 7:9; 8:7; Ob. 11.
[13] Gn. 12:1–5.
[14] Gn. 12:6–9.
[15] Gn. 12:10.
[16] Gn. 15:13.
[17] Gn. 20:1.
[18] Gn. 21:23, 24.
[19] Gn. 23:4.
[20] Gn. 26:1–3.
[21] Gn. 35:27.
[22] Gn. 32:5.
[23] Gn. 31–33.
[24] Gn. 47:4.
[25] Ex. 2:22; 18:3.
[26] Ex. 6:4.
[27] Dt. 26:5.
[28] Lv. 25:23.
[29] See note 3.
[30] Ex. 12:43, 45; Dt. 14:21, 15:3; 17:15; 23:21.
[31] Ex. 12:19, 48, 49; Nu. 9:14; *cf.* 2 Ch. 30:25.
[32] Ex. 20:10; Dt. 5:14.
[33] Ex. 23:12.
[34] Lv. 25:6.
[35] Lv. 16:29.
[36] Lv. 17:8; 22:18; Nu. 15:14–16.
[37] Lv. 17:10–13.
[38] Lv. 17:15; Nu. 19:10; Dt. 14:21 is the only text in which the immigrant and the foreigner are associated.
[39] Lv. 20:2; 24:16.
[40] Lv. 22:10 excludes the guest as well as the Israelite ‘layman’.
[41] Lv. 25:35. Note that this text explicitly associates the immigrant and the guest with the brother.
[42] Lv. 25:44–46 allows the Israelites to take slaves from among the clans of the temporary residents, just as Lv. 25:47–54 authorizes an immigrant or a guest to take slaves from among the Israelites, with the condition that they

guarantee them the right to be rebought at any time and, in any case, to be freed the year of Jubilee.
[43] Nu. 15:26, 29, 30.
[44] Nu. 35:15; *cf.* Jos. 20:9.
[45] Lv. 24:22.
[46] Dt. 29:10; *cf.* Jos. 8:33.
[47] Dt. 31:12; *cf.* Jos. 8:35. Note the consequences of Israel's violation of the law with regard to the immigrant (Dt. 28:43) and to the foreigner (Dt. 29:21).
[48] Lv. 19:10; 23:22; *cf.* Ezk. 22:29.
[49] Dt. 26:11.
[50] Dt. 24:17.
[51] Ex. 22:21–22; Dt. 10:18; 24:17, 19, 20, 21; 27:19; *cf.* Pss. 94:6; 146:9; Je. 7:6; 22:3; Ezk. 22:7; Mal. 3:5.
[52] Dt. 14:29; 16:11, 14; 26:12, 13.
[53] *Cf.* Zc. 7:10.
[54] Ex. 22:21; 23:9; Lv. 19:34; Dt. 10:19; 16:12; 23:8; 24:18, 22; 26:5.
[55] Ex. 23:9.
[56] Ex. 22:20; 23:9; Lv. 19:33; Dt. 24:14, 17.
[57] Dt. 1:16–17.
[58] Dt. 27:19.
[59] Dt. 10:18–19.
[60] Lv. 19:34; *cf.* Ezk. 47:22.
[61] Dt. 14:29; 26:12–13.
[62] Lv. 19:10; 23:22; Dt. 24:19–21; 26:11.
[63] Dt. 16:11, 14.
[64] Ps. 119:19.
[65] Ps. 39:12.
[66] Ps. 69:8.
[67] Ps. 94:6.
[68] Ps. 146:9.
[69] 1 Ch. 29:13–15.
[70] 2 Ch. 6:32, 33; *cf.* 1 Ki. 8:41–43.
[71] *Cf.* Ezk. 14:7.
[72] Ezk. 22:7, 29; Zc. 7:10.
[73] Je. 7:6; 22:3.
[74] Mal. 3:5.
[75] Ezk. 47:22, 23.

[76] Is. 14:1.
[77] Is. 56:3.
[78] Is. 56:6–7; *cf.* Ezk. 44:9; Joel 3:17.
[79] Is. 60:10.
[80] Is. 61:5.
[81] Is. 62:8; *cf.* Ho. 7:9; 8:7.
[82] Je. 30:8–9.

Georges Chawkat Moucarry

Georges Chawkat Moucarry, who grew up in Syria and then studied Christian and Islamic theology in France, is now on the IFES staff in France.